

COMMENTARY

PRONUNCIATION OF SCIENTIFIC NAMES

I attended the Tercentenary of the Edinburgh Botanical Garden a few years ago and found myself in the unenviable position of having to read Peter Raven's paper on the Mediterranean Flora, Peter having been quarantined at the Zurich airport after exposure to some epizootic. If any of you have ever had to do this you realize that it is a thankless job; you won't do it well, and your listeners will resent the fact that they are not getting the word from the "horse's mouth".

After a few seconds of cogitation, I thought I had something that would put the audience in the palm of my hand. When I got to the rostrum, I announced that Peter was not here to give his presentation, a fact that I regretted as much as they did, but that to compensate them I would offer them a bonus: I would pronounce the scientific names in "European". I did, and they were overjoyed because they could understand me without having the words written out. After the reading, Dr. Clapham came up to me and said: "You know, I really think that we English-speakers should make some effort to meet the Europeans half-way." A remarkable statement considering the source, and ever since that day I have been teaching and preaching this to my students and colleagues.

For some reason, it seems to me that Americans and Englishmen try very hard to understand Europeans; we mentally translate their broken English into our equivalent, for we know they are trying a lot harder than we ever could to master a horrible foreign language. On the other hand, when the Amerenglish speak to Europeans about plants and animals and use scientific names one can almost see the hands instantly clap themselves against their ears; they do not even try to understand us; our pronunciation is, as one German colleague put it, "quite something other". This is true of our students as well. Try to give any group of students a list of plant names, orally, and see the spellings they come up with!

William T. Stearn, in his chapter on *The Latin Alphabet and Pronunciation*, in "*Botanical Latin*", approaches this middle ground, especially in his recommendations on the sounds of letters. But he still likes the Classical Latin pronunciation of the words. Nevertheless, he says: "How they are pronounced really matters little provided they sound pleasant and are *understood by all concerned*." Here is the crux of the matter. I choose to play down the rules on stress and antepenultimates in favor of understanding. My rules are simple:

1. Try to approach the style of pronunciation of the person you are talking to. This is the cardinal rule.

2. Remember these things about European pronunciation of the letters: *i* is never pronounced "eye", always as in "see" or as in "sit". Terminal double *ii* can be slightly separated but not necessarily. *A* is never "ay" but always "ah". *Y* is not as in "cipher", but as in "cynical". *E* is never *ee* but *eh*. Consonants are not so simple, their sound often depending on the listener's nationality. Try "*Halerpestes* on for size. The Russians make it *Khal-yer-pyes-tyes*. But *ti* can be *tsi* but never "sh".

3. Most important to my thesis of "understandability", and this goes against classical pronunciation: try not to distort the sound of the various word stems by accenting unimportant connecting vowels, particularly "o". *Phyllo-phora*, rather than *phyllophora*. Try not to change the sound of the person or place of honor: *nut*tall-i, not *nut-tallee-eye* (Hulten hated that pronunciation with a white passion; he would grit his teeth and rub it in my nose with a vengeance); *Weber-i*, not *Webeeree-eye*; *Eric-a*, not *Er-eye-ca*.

That's all there is to it. Of course there are purists who insist that if there are rules

of Classical Latin we should stick to them. At the expense of communication? I think not. As Stearn also points out, "The relation of botanical Latin to classical Latin is that of a former dependency which by vigorous economic growth over many years has established traditions and divergencies arising out of its special conditions and history that must be accepted, if need be, by proclaiming its status as a language in its own right."

Nobody can honestly say that Amerenglish pronunciation of the vowels and consonants is Latin, so why should we worry about the accentuation either? We are in a smaller world now, and spoken science is more common among the peoples of our world than it was when Classical Latin was important. As Clapham suggested, "Let's meet them half way!"

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FINAL ANNOUNCEMENT

RARE AND ENDANGERED PLANTS—A CALIFORNIA CONFERENCE ON THEIR CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT 5–8 November 1986

Location: The conference will be held at the Capital Plaza
 Holiday Inn, 300 J Street, Sacramento, CA, U.S.A.

The California Native Plant Society (CNPS), in conjunction with government agencies, conservation groups, and private corporations, is organizing a conference on the conservation and management of rare and endangered plants. It is designed to be a forum for information exchange through concurrent sessions, poster sessions, and workshops. Proceedings will be published by CNPS.

Co-sponsors include: California Department of Fish and Game, The Nature Conservancy, California Botanical Society, The Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden, Pacific Gas & Electric, Southern California Edison, Bureau of Land Management, Jones & Stokes Associates and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Keynote speakers include: Dr. Paul Ehrlich (Stanford Univ.), Dr. Daniel Axelrod (Univ. California, Davis), Dr. Ray Dasmann (Univ. California, Santa Cruz), Mr. Ed Hastey (California Director, Bureau of Land Management), Mr. Zane Smith (Regional Forester, U.S. Forest Service), and Dr. Faith Campbell (National Resource Defense Council).

Questions or comments regarding the conference should be directed to: Jim Nelson, Conference Coordinator, California Native Plant Society, 909 12th Street, Suite 116, Sacramento, California 95814, U.S.A.